The Fur Trade in the Scratching River Region

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The Fur Trade in the Scratching River Region

The fur trade posts along the Scratching River typified the bitter conflict and rivalry which dominated the fur trade in the Canadian interior during the early years of the nineteenth century. In the 1790s, as the Hudson's Bay Company began to push further inland from its main operations at Albany on James Bay to recapture the trade being intercepted by the southern posts of the Montreal-based North West Company (NWCo), competition had escalated. The struggle intensified in 1797 with the formation of the XY Company, composed of disaffected NWCo traders led by Alexander MacKenzie. All three concerns were vying for the same Indian trade and rival posts began to spring up along the major river systems of the interior. By 1801, the Red River region and the area around the Scratching River were drawn into the fur trade conflict.

The Red River region was a flat grassy area which yielded only a few low quality beaver pelts each season. Most of the area's rivers were shallow, meandering streams, and its major value lay in its close proximity to the buffalo ranges to the west and south. Buffalo meat was the main ingredient for pemmican, the staple of the NWCo's inland canoe brigades.

La Vérendrye and his sons were the first recorded Europeans to penetrate the region, and they established a number of posts along the Red and Assiniboine rivers in the 1730s. These forts were to serve more as a base for expansion to the western sea, than as fur trade posts. After 1763, the independent "pedlars"

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The route taken by La Vérendrye and his sons and the posts they established are depicted above

from Montreal returned to the area, but it was not until the 1790s that competition on the Red began to escalate.

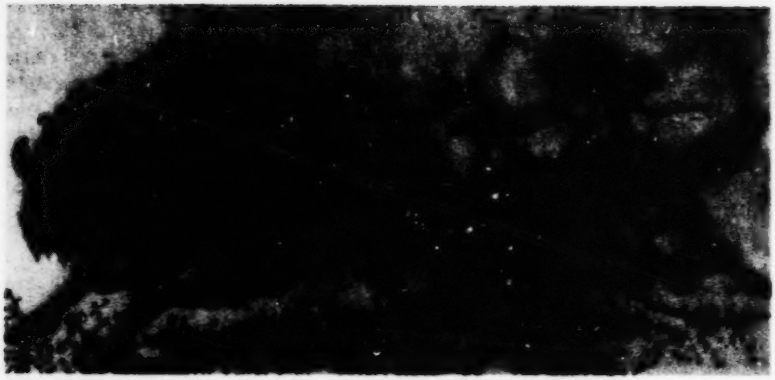
The first North West Company post in the area was founded by Charles Chaboillez in 1796 on the Rat River, less than a kilometre south of its junction with the Red. Returns were not very encouraging, and the fort, like many in other regions, was abandoned after one year. Passing by the deserted post in 1800, Alexander Henry the Younger noted that the area's once plentiful supply of beaver had been all but destroyed. Another post was built by Chaboillez on the Red in 1797-98 near the later site of Henry's Fort Pembina.

With the appointment of Alexander Henry the Younger as supervisor of the Lower Red River District, the North West Company's operations in the region increased significantly. Nephew of the famed Nor'Wester and explorer of the same name, Henry had been raised in the life of the fur trade. He was born in Montreal and entered the service of the NWCo in 1792, spending his first years trading with the Saulteaux. In 1799 he wintered at a post near Fort Dauphin before journeying to Montreal where he was probably informed of his new position.

Henry embarked from Grand Portage to the Red River in July 1800. The route up to Lake of the Woods was marked with rough waters and gruelling portages so punishing that Henry had to purchase new canoes at Lac des Bois Blancs. His brigade reached Fort Rainy Lake on 2 August and, in a brief respite from the drudgery of river travel, "the gentlemen danced until daybreak, all very merry."

The men continued through Lake of the Woods down the Winnipeg River where dangerous rapids claimed one of the river-craft and two crewmen, along with many desperately needed supplies. At Fort Bas de la Rivière Ouinipec, the general depot for provisions brought down from the Red and Assiniboine, the Nor'Wester dried and repacked his provisions before ascending the smooth and meandering Red River. At the forks of the Red and the Assiniboine, Henry dispatched some of his men and supplies to the Portage la Prairie post on the Assiniboine, or "Upper Red" River. The rest of the brigade, now reduced to four canoes and twenty-nine people (including four women and four children), continued up the Red.

En route, Henry attracted more and more Indian bands eager to be outfitted for winter trapping and hunting. The area was dominated mainly by Assiniboine and Saulteaux, as the Cree feared attack by the mobile and hostile Sioux of the south. At the entrance of rivière la Sale (La Salle River), the Nor'Wester presented the Indian Chiefs with gifts, which included a scarlet laced-coat, a lace hat, a round red feather, a white linen shirt, a pair of leggings and a flag, along with other gifts. Alcohol was Henry's most efficient weapon in the fur trade. Although Quebec missionaries had threatened to excommunicate anyone who traded liquor to the Indians, the Nor'Westers always presented it as a "gift", encouraging drunkeness to increase the Indians' dependence on the post and to lower the price of furs. Henry refused to outfit the Indians so close to the Forks, and chose instead to draw his companions into the untouched southern country which lay just outside of the traditional bounds of the dreaded Sioux raiding parties.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

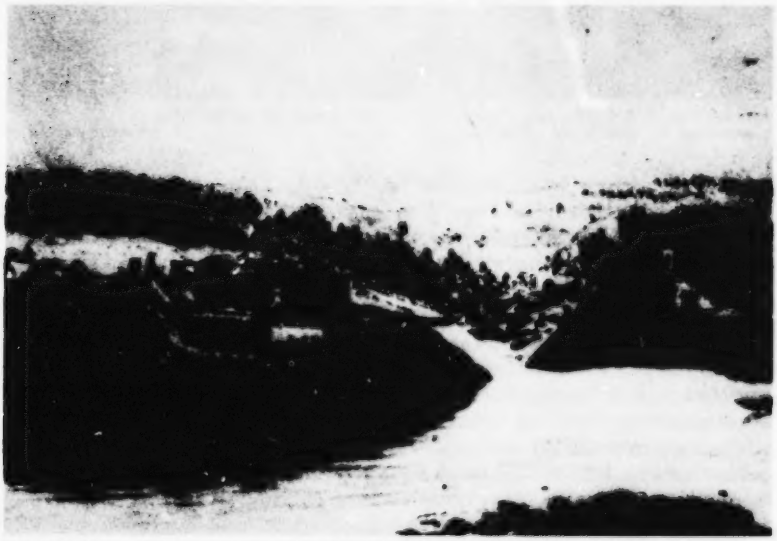
Alexander Henry first witnessed a buffalo hunt as he travelled on the Red River

Henry first saw Scratching River or rivière aux Gratias on 26 August 1800. The river's French name and its English "equivalent" described the small Gratias shrub which grew in abundance along its banks. Henry's detailed observations of this and other features of the area were carefully recorded in his journal. Even the presence of a nearby salt pit whose centre seemed "continuously to agitate, bubbling like a pot of boiling water" was meticulously noted in the diary.

At Scratching River, Henry also witnessed a buffalo hunt. He was astonished by the extent to which these animals had transformed the landscape, turning the soft black mud of the river bank where they came to drink into a surface as hard as pavement and knocking down trees and trampling paths on the nearby plains where they roamed. He and his interpreter, Jean-Baptiste Desmarais, ventured out on horseback to see the herds while the men set up camp. Almost blinded by the dust raised by the thundering herd, the two trappers managed to kill four buffalo with little difficulty.

That night the Indians held a council. They were growing increasingly apprehensive of Sioux attack and demanded that Henry build his main post on the Scratching River. The Nor'Wester threatened to proceed without them and then strolled down to the river bank, leaving them to consider his warning. While standing at the water's edge, it is quite possible that Henry paused to consider the possibility of establishing an outpost nearby. The Scratching River was a long meandering stream originating in the Pembina Hills where it was known as rivière aux Islets de Bois because the clumps of trees which lined its banks resembled little islands. It later divided into three branches which joined on the open prairie to form a larger marsh some "twenty leagues in circumference". The river then separated into two courses which rejoined within approximately forty kilometres. Although numerous bears roamed its length, Henry was convinced that there were few beaver in the area. As a result, he persuaded the Indians to follow him further southward. While the canoes proceeded downriver, Henry followed on horseback hunting buffalo for sport.

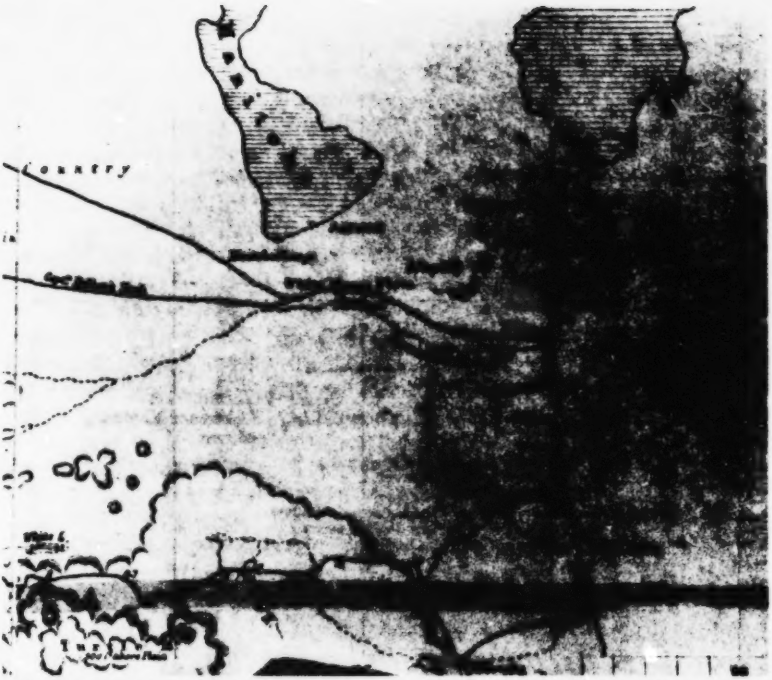
Henry established his major post at Park River, and sent small detachments to winter at rivière aux Marais and Hair Hills. In 1801 he moved the central post to the Pembina River, which served as the base of operations for the rest of his career on the Red. Like most fur trade posts, Fort Pembina probably included a number of "Red River Frame" buildings surrounded by a sturdy stockade of oak poles four to five metres high, lined with a rampart and a guard tower at the front gate. The men's cabins bordered the two side walls on the inside. Due to the constant threat of Sioux attacks, a block house was added to the compound and the men were kept on constant alert.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Fort Pembina, c. 1822, many years after Alexander Henry the Younger had left the area of the Red River

The Sioux were not Alexander Henry's only problem. In the fall of 1801, Thomas Miller of the Hudson's Bay Company brought eight men to build a post below Fort Pembina on the east side of the Red River. The XY Company also built very near the North West Company post, and the additional competition proved to be a constant source of anxiety for Henry. In order to gain greater control of the region, he was forced to set up more outposts. Small crews had already been dispatched to Hair Hills and Grandes Fourches when, on 17 September 1801, he learned that the XY Company's J. Duford was building at Scratching River. Eight days later, the Nor'Wester outfitted his most trusted assistant, interpreter J.B. Desmarais, and five other men with trade goods and sent them off to build at rivière aux Gratias.



Although prepared by the British North American Exploring Expedition (1857-58), this map locates many of the important landmarks in the area of rivière aux Gratias or Scratching River

The master of this new outpost, Jean Baptiste Desmarais, was a hardened veteran of the Canadian interior. He had led at least one party from Lake Winnipeg to Lake Superior by the Kaministiquia route and was regarded as a first rate guide. Like most men wintering in the fur country, he had taken an Indian wife with whom he had at least two children. His family accompanied Henry's brigade from Grand Portage but probably did not follow Desmarais to Scratching River. Although Henry regarded Desmarais as an invaluable assistant, he did not consider the old Canadian a competent judge of fine liquor. He later recalled an evening when he broke open a cask of West Indian rum and offered Desmarais and another man a drink. Much to Henry's amusement, the old guide smiled, smacked his lips and swore that it was the best cognac he had ever tasted.

The Scratching River post proved a failure from the outset. Desmarais and one assistant, "old Mouge", abandoned the post in early November as they had not seen one Indian since their arrival. Freeze-up on the Pembina River prevented their canoe journey back to the central post. When they finally arrived, Henry ordered Desmarais to return and continue the struggle against Duford's operation on rivière aux Gratias.

The NWCo's post was probably located somewhere near the junction of the Scratching and Red rivers. Their XY rivals may have been located nearby as opposing posts were usually built close together. Although no description of the building was ever recorded, it probably resembled the small, five metre square hut at Hair Hills which served as a dwelling, storehouse and shop. The hut would have been plastered with mud and clay for insulation and covered with a roof made of wood or sod and twigs. The fireplace and chimney in fur posts were usually built of river stones mortared with clay. Wooden floors were common in most houses but may not have been installed at Scratching River.

Provisioning would not have been a problem for the outpost. During the winter, Henry visited Scratching River in his horse and sleigh and noted that the area offered a plentiful supply of fish, buffalo, moose and red deer. Most forts kept a garden and potato patch but Desmarais, arriving in late September, hardly had time to begin his own. Salt was available from the pit located down-river from which Henry and his men gathered their own supply. Desmarais and "old Mouge" would have busied themselves repairing the post, hunting, and performing other tasks.

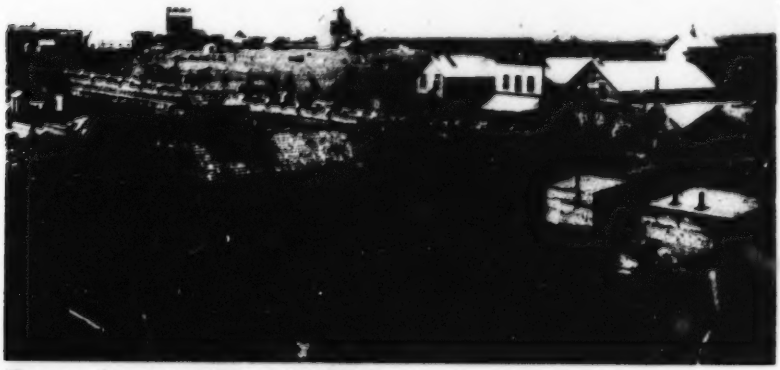
Competition for the limited supply of furs at Scratching River must have been intense. Desmarais' rival was a hard-bitten trader who knew well the ruthless practices of the interior. After the coalition of the two companies in 1804, Duford joined the North West Company and was accidently killed by an Indian.

Once known as rivière aux Gratias or Scratching River, the meandering Morris River now winds its way through Manitoba farm land

Desmarais and "old Mouge" managed to pass the winter at Scratching River but with little success. In late April they journeyed up the Red with their furs and arrived at Fort Pembina on the 28th. Their "returns" were soon packed and dispatched with the rest of the department's furs on 28 May. Of Henry's four posts operating in the winter of 1801-02, the Scratching River venture was the least productive, accounting for only 130 of a total of 1,369 beaver skins, 7 of 90 bags of pemmican and only 3½ of 62 packs of furs. It is not surprising that the outpost was not reopened in the fall. The XY operation was also probably abandoned at the same time, as Duford built a new post at Terre Blanche in late 1802.

Alexander Henry remained in the region until 1808. Although he established a number of newer outposts, his total trade in the area never exceeded 1,800 "made beaver". In 1802 he began to use "a new sort of cart . . . about four feet high and perfectly straight" with four perpendicular spokes to each wheel "drawn by one horse", probably an early forerunner of the Red River cart. Four years later Henry became one of the first whites to meet the Mandan tribe of the Dakota plains. He left the region in 1808 to take charge of three posts on the north Saskatchewan and later moved into present-day British Columbia at Fort George. In 1818 he drowned in the Columbia River.

Scratching River continued to play a role in Manitoba history once the buffalo hunt assumed paramount importance in the battle for the fur trade and the Selkirk Settlement was established. In the 1850s, when the Red River carts of independent traders made regular trips to the booming commercial centre of St. Paul, Minnesota on the upper Mississippi, the Scratching River was passed by carters regularly. Permanent settlement began in 1874, and in 1883 the river was renamed in honour of Manitoba's Lieutenant-Governor, Alexander Morris as was the nearby town of Morris, Manitoba.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The town of Morris, Manitoba, 12 July 1907

The fur trading posts on the Scratching River in 1801-02 symbolized the intense rivalry which had developed between the various fur companies for dominance in the Canadian interior in the early nineteenth century. Although almost nothing now remains of the forts, a provincial plaque stands in Morris in commemoration of their role in the opening of the Canadian West.

Suggestions for Further Reading

General texts on the Canadian fur trade include some references to activities on the Scratching River: Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada; an Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); E.E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967) and Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974). An article by Charles N. Bell which appeared in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, No. 1 (1888), entitled "Henry's Journal Covering Adventures and Experiences in the Fur Trade on the Red River, 1799-1801" is an invaluable reference. Various journals and post records available at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba are another valuable source of information.

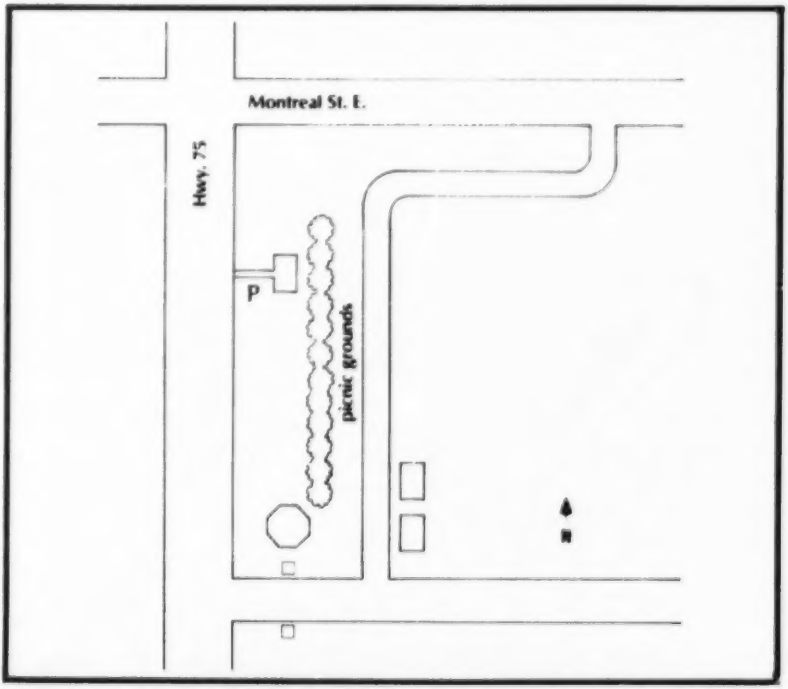
Credits

The cover photograph is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

Town of Morris

The Morris River, known as the Scratching River in 1801 was the site of North West Co., and XY Co., fur-trading posts. Settlement began in 1874 where the trail from Pembina crossed the river, and the settlers were of British Ancestry mainly from Ontario. Both the town and the river were named after the Hon. Alexander Morris, Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba 1872-1877. The town was incorporated in 1883. To the west lies Lowe Farm, a village named for John Lowe, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, who owned and farmed a large tract of land here.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba



This plaque is located on the grounds of the museum in Morris, Manitoba.